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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001024

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/31/2016

TAGS: IS LE PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: LEBANON'S RELIGIOUS LEADERS NOT
OPTIMISTIC ABOUT POLITICAL PROGRESS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, head of the Maronite church, and Patriarch Catholicos Aram I, head of Lebanon's Armenian Orthodox community, both expressed doubt that the current political deadlock between the March 14 forces and the informal coalition of Hizballah, Amal, and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement could be resolved. Sfeir, in particular, was dismayed by the new rupture between the antagonists that took place at the Arab Summit on March 29 and spilled over into yesterday's Cabinet session, which dissolved into a shouting match between embattled President Lahoud and March 14 stalwarts Marwan Hamadeh and Ahmad Fatfat. In discussing the presidential situation, Sfeir remarked the most qualified non-Aoun candidates would be Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, and somewhat surprisingly, Nayla Mouawad. He said that Aoun, despite his front-runner status in the Christian community, would not be able to represent all of Lebanon (i.e. Saad Hariri's Future Movement and Walid Jumblatt's Druse community). Patriarch Aram likewise deeply regretted the incident in Khartoum, saying it effectively marked the end of the national dialogue, a process which had already begun to sputter. End summary.

¶2. (U) The head of the Maronite church in Lebanon, Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, met with the Ambassador and poloff on March 31 in Bkirki, north of Beirut. Sfeir had just returned to Beirut from Rome and, as usual, had been meeting with numerous political figures, the most recent being Michel Aoun on March 30. The Ambassador met with the Armenian patriarch on March 30 in Antelias.

¶3. (C) Patriarch Sfeir was gratified the US and the rest of the international community were continuing their strong support of Lebanon's nascent democracy, as evidenced by the unanimous passage of UNSCR 1664 and recent statements by President Bush. Sfeir said it was more important than ever that Lebanon have the support of its friends as the country struggled with political stalemate.

A DISCOURAGING WEEK

¶4. (C) The understated Sfeir characterized the past week as "most discouraging" with a rapid cascade of unfavorable developments: Lahoud/Siniora's public argument in Khartoum, the harsh criticism of Siniora (and implicitly, Saad Hariri) by Speaker Berri in Parliament, a press conference by Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah and Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal featuring fiery rhetoric not heard in months, and finally,

the political tumult of last night's Cabinet session.

¶15. (C) He agreed with the Ambassador that with the country now roughly split between two camps, political progress would be very difficult, as it would require patience and goodwill -- not presently in evidence. Sfeir observed that while all sides seem to be avoiding actions that could lead to actual violence, the past few days has seen the gulf widen between the adversaries.

AOUN'S MYSTIFYING OPTIMISM

¶16. (C) Remarkably enough, Sfeir said that in his meeting the previous evening, FPM leader Michel Aoun had seemed "optimistic" about his chances to ascend to the presidency. Sfeir said the former general implied that the improved security situation (last act of political violence: December 12 assassination of Gibran Tueni) was due principally to his ability to work with Hizballah, as demonstrated by their February 6 communique. According to Sfeir, Aoun seems to be amazingly confident that his dalliance with Nasrallah will be perceived by Lebanon's citizenry as a noble act worthy of reward.

¶17. (C) Shaking his head in bemusement, Sfeir continued that although Aoun may rightfully claim leadership of the Christian community ("...as he is always telling me..."), his selection as president would be divisive and ill-advised. Of course, he acknowledged, the institution of the presidency was allotted to the Christian community, but Lebanon's president must also be able to reach across all sectarian lines, and this the patriarch said, Aoun cannot do -- concluding that Lebanon under Aoun would be "ungovernable."

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¶18. (C) Bluntly describing the overall behavior of Lebanon's politicians as "deplorable," the patriarch stated it would be extremely difficult to change the president, particularly after the recent heated exchanges. Sfeir acknowledged he was aware of a recent suggestion that perhaps the pro-reform coalition could "float" candidates to reassure the Christian community that March 14 (i.e. Saad Hariri) didn't want to steamroll the process. He indicated the idea had some merit and ticked off the individuals he believed had the best qualifications: Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, and Nayla Mouawad. He admitted that Mouawad's candidacy would be breaking the mold, but noted that even Muslim counties had elected women as chiefs of state, and perhaps it was time for Lebanon. (Whispering to the Ambassador later as the Ambassador got up to leave, Sfeir clarified that his personal favorite was Nassib Lahoud.)

¶19. (C) Concerning Lahoud, the patriarch plainly said the isolated president served at the pleasure of the Syrian regime, and if he resigned without their permission, he would be under "serious threat." Sfeir also bemoaned the "humiliation" of the institution and expressed fear that the presidency would suffer irreparable damage if the current status continued. He argued that as the only non-Muslim head of state in the Arab world, special care should be taken to preserve it as an important symbol of pluralism and liberalism.

¶10. (C) Sfeir also commented on other ideas being put forth by various factions. He said the idea of new parliamentary elections was fraught with risk because it would subject Lebanon's electorate with yet another change in government. He remarked there was also the question of the proposed new electoral law, which was also in danger of stalemate due to political differences. Another idea, which apparently came from Aoun, was a proposal to change the country's constitution to permit direct election of the president. This, the patriarch felt, may be acceptable in more stable times, but in the current situation may produce as much

instability as snap parliamentary elections.

¶11. (C) In Sfeir's opinion, the most reasonable solution would be to allow the constitution to work: propose 3-4 well qualified candidates and follow established parliamentary procedures. This, he concluded, was the only way to produce a legitimate president who could represent all the country's sectarian communities.

ANOTHER VOICE OF REASON

¶12. (C) Armenian Patriarch Aram was similarly distressed by the escalating war of words between March 14 and March 8 (plus Aoun) forces. He contended the national dialogue, though well intended, could not truly address the two most important issues: the presidency and Hizballah's arms. Aram maintained that despite Hassan Nasrallah's confident demeanor, the Hizballah leader could actually do nothing without the permission of his sponsors in Tehran. Tehran, he argued, may not really care whether Lahoud stays or goes, but under current international circumstances, the Iranian regime would never permit the loss of an armed proxy so close to its chief nemesis, Israel. As a result, the Armenian patriarch believed there could be some movement regarding the Lebanese presidency, but none at all concerning Hizballah's militia.

¶13. (C) In the Armenian patriarch's opinion, Lebanon and the West had to be most concerned with the growing power and reach of Iran -- in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Iraq. Shia Iran's ambitions, and the concurrent growth of Sunni fundamentalism, he remarked, would confront democratic nations for an extended time to come and require steadfast positions and cooperation among those countries seeking freedom.

FELTMAN